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Intelligent Intelligence

The adequacy of the nation's intelligence services is again being scrutinized by Congress, as a by-product of the continuing Cuban crisis. The inquiry of the Senate Preparedness Subcommittee, headed by Senator John Stennis of Mississippi, coincides by chance with the publication of an article by Allen Dulles, former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, in which Mr. Dulles takes his familiar stand against any further Congressional controls over the agency.

We think—as we have often said before—that Mr. Dulles is mistaken in this stand. The establishment of a carefully selected joint Congressional watchdog-committee on intelligence (whose functions would approximate those of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy), would provide important control over activities that are rooted in secrecy and conducted without benefit of the normal restraints and restrictions of democratic government.

Intelligence is a cornerstone upon which effective policy must be built. But intelligence agencies should not themselves make policy — as they have sometimes done in the past. And the power they wield, which derives primarily from secrecy, is so great that it must be effectively monitored.

Such a joint committee should not be limited to supervision of the C.I.A. alone. It should supervise the entire intelligence community for adequacy, effectiveness and abuse. This control is all the more important now, since there are glaring gaps — for which no responsibility has been publicly assessed — in the intelligence picture presented to the public for last September and early October, when the Russian missile campaign in Cuba was at its height.

It is particularly important to weigh the effects on American intelligence capabilities of the recent enforced merger in the Pentagon of the three service agencies into a monolithic Defense Intelligence Agency. Senator Stennis's committee will presumably find out whether this merger impaired intelligence collection or, even worse, facilitated the distortion of intelligence by top policy makers so that their evaluation of intelligence would accord with their preconceived policy. A joint Congressional committee on intelligence, composed of carefully selected members of both parties and both houses, would provide a continuing examination and control of all intelligence facilities, something that recent history shows is badly needed.